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AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES  
ACCORD INTERIM REPORT

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ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. This submission will respond specifically to the aspects of the Interim report that considered improving student wellbeing and safety, including empowering students on matters that affect them.

#### ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

#### CONTACT DETAILS

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#### OVERVIEW OF CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING TRENDS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

Young people bear the major burden for onset and impact of mental ill-health across the whole lifespan.(1) Three-quarters of all mental ill-health begins before the age of 24 years.(2) The most recent National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing found almost 40 per cent of young Australians aged 16–24 years had experienced a mental health condition in the past year.(3) Suicide is the leading cause of death in young people.(4)

While there is limited research into the nature and prevalence of mental ill-health in Australian university students, available data suggests university students are at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing compared to the general population.(5) Some studies show as many as two-thirds of university students report high to very high levels of distress.(5, 6) Mental ill-health can have a profound negative impact of students' welfare and educational achievement.(7)

Some student cohorts are an increased risk of mental ill-health, including young people (less than 25 years), and international students.(7) Students from these cohorts often have to manage additional stressors (risk factors) when transitioning to independence, such as: living away from family, financial stress, balancing employment and study, increased responsibility, and pressure to excel.(5, 7)

#### FOUNDATIONS OF A HIGH FUNCTIONING NATIONAL SYSTEM: MENTALLY HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES

In 2017, Orygen released a major [policy report](#) on the mental health of Australian university students. The *Under the radar* report found gaps in responses to student mental health and wellbeing across a range of areas including a lack of university strategies, inconsistent data collection and monitoring,

insufficient staffing profile within counselling services to meet demand and a lack of evidence on effective interventions and program responses.

These gaps had been driven in part by a historical assumption that university students, having mostly reached the age of maturity (18 years) before or during their first year of study, could manage their health requirements independently without the support of their education provider.(5) There is now recognition that many young adults benefit from ongoing mental health and wellbeing support delivered through settings where they work and study well into early adulthood and that universities are well-placed settings for the identification of at-risk students, and the delivery of early intervention and prevention initiatives.(8)

In 2018, Orygen was funded by the Australian Government to develop the [Australian University Mental Health Framework](#) (the Framework) which provides evidence-based guidance for mentally healthy universities. The Framework, launched in early 2020, was developed through extensive consultation with students, university and mental health sector stakeholders, and international experts undertaking similar initiatives overseas.

A number of Australian institutions, including The University of Adelaide(9), Deakin University(10), Victoria University(11), RMIT University(12), The University of Western Australia(13), Western Sydney University(14), have already aligned their recent mental health and wellbeing strategies to the Framework.

Similar frameworks or guidelines have been developed by other institutes and peak bodies to address comparable psychosocial hazards experienced by university students. Examples include Universities Australia's *Sexual Harm Response Guidelines 2023* and *Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities Best Practice Framework*, and a range of guidance across diversity and inclusion, wellbeing and safety and preventing and responding to sexual assault and harassment that have been developed by the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Association.

Orygen welcomes the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report's vision of '*Creating the foundations of a high functioning national system and improving student wellbeing and accountability*' and the proposed recommendation to develop a student led charter for welfare, safety and wellbeing - similar to the approach taken in New Zealand.

However, we strongly advise that this process builds on, and doesn't duplicate or reinvent, the work that has already been undertaken to understand student needs, identify the evidence base for effective responses and develop actions for student support within the university context. The greatest gap currently, is not the development of more frameworks and guidance, but resourcing and support for implementation of existing frameworks along with evaluation, monitoring and accountable reporting of student experience outcomes.

Therefore, we would recommend that through the process of developing and delivering a student charter, there are concerted efforts to link to, and require use of, existing frameworks and good practice guidance such as the *University Mental Health Framework* and provide a database of approved and evidence-based frameworks and guidance documents across the intersecting areas of welfare, safety and wellbeing. Collating and reviewing existing documents would ensure this information is immediately available to institutions that have not yet developed student mental health and wellbeing strategies.

Further, *Under the radar* found there was a paucity of national and aggregated data sets in Australia through which we can understand the prevalence and trends of mental ill-health among university students. This has made it difficult for government policy makers, universities and mental health organisations to: a) understand the extent of the issue; b) direct appropriate levels of resources to address it; and c) monitor the impact that could be made through the implementation of policies, strategies, programs and interventions in these settings. This has not changed since the report's release in 2017.

The *University Student Experience Survey*, which is conducted annually and collects responses from over 170,000 students continues to only capture mental health related experiences among those students who indicate that they are considering an early course exit. With a review of the *Student Experience Survey* underway, there is a significant opportunity to improve our understanding of students' experiences of wellbeing, safety and welfare through the inclusion of a limited number of additional questions to this tool.

### Recommendations

**That any recommendation relating to a charter or nationally consistent approach for student safety and wellbeing, include recognition of the existing frameworks such as the Australian University Mental Health Framework and focus efforts toward how they can be implemented.**

**That a national database or clearinghouse of approved and evidence-based guidelines and frameworks is developed and maintained to inform universities' implementation of strategies to protect the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students.**

**That experiences of student wellbeing and safety must be consistently and regularly collected and reported on. An additional field of 3-5 questions in the Student Experience Survey would deliver valuable information for governments, universities and the mental health sector on how students over the past year perceived their mental health and wellbeing, factors which may have influenced this and the level/type of support they received.**

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Orygen strongly supports the Review's particular consideration of the mental health and wellbeing of international students. Research shows international students are at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health and are less likely to seek support. While student experience and wellbeing is included as section in the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030, the actions listed were limited to governments working together to enhance students' awareness of their rights and responsibilities while living, working and studying in Australia, supporting the capability of all providers to deliver student support programs and maintaining student representation on the Council for International Education.

Orygen was commissioned by the Department of Education in 2020 to undertake extensive consultation with the international education sector and international students and produce a [good practice report](#) for all international education providers on how best to support international student wellbeing and physical safety.

Again, we would recommend that any further work determined through the University Accord build on this, and extend beyond what was outlined in the International Education Strategy to include future action to progress opportunities identified through the Orygen report, including: a) the development of communities of practice and online resource hubs for good practice to be shared, b) a national international student wellbeing strategy and c) building the international student peer workforce to address issues of stigma, cultural concerns and low help-seeking rates among this group. As an example, Orygen, Melbourne Polytechnic and RMIT University have partnered to deliver a mental health peer work training program to international students with lived experience of mental ill-health.

### Recommendations

**The Australian Universities Accord enables a stronger commitment by:**

- **the Australian Government to supporting the safety and wellbeing of international students through international education policies**
- **state and territory government through adequate resourcing directed to state and territory Study Centres to deliver wellbeing and safety supports and information**
- **universities to target resourcing of activities, programs, research and projects that aim to improve international student experience outcomes.**

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**Orygen acknowledges** the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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